

COVID-19: COUNCIL RESPONSE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Covid-19 pandemic has required an urgent, multi-agency response at national and local government level. Argyll and Bute Council has been working in partnership with community planning partners and other agencies to respond to the pandemic in Argyll and Bute, to maintain critical front line services and, where possible, to look ahead with a view to service restoration and planning for the future. This report provides members of the Business Continuity Committee (BCC) with an update on decisions made and actions that the Council has taken as part of its contribution to that collective response since 1st April and is a follow up to the report made to the Committee at its first meeting in April.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The Committee is invited to consider the Council's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and to note the range of actions that have been taken across council services in response to the pandemic.

3.0 DETAIL

- 3.1 The Council continues to respond to the global Covid-19 pandemic. As well as specific activities such as caring for people, business support and more, the council is also focusing on resilience activity and maintaining critical frontline services.
- 3.2 The Leader and Depute Leader of the Council, together with the Leader of the SNP Group, meet with senior officers regularly to consider different aspects of the ongoing response and other activity. Any decisions that require to be made by this Leadership Group are logged and a formal report of these will be submitted to a future meeting of the council. Regular email bulletins are sent to all elected members to keep them apprised of the situation on an ongoing basis.
- 3.3 The Council's operational response to Covid-19 is wide ranging and involves all areas of the Council's work. The first response update report to the April meeting of the Business Continuity Committee outlined the actions taken at the immediate onset of the pandemic. This included partnership work with NHS Highland and the Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership on arrangements to support vulnerable people; the actions taken by the Education Service to swiftly put in place arrangements to support learning at home as well

as maintaining provision for children of key workers; the launch of a dedicated helpline to handle queries and requests for assistance on a wide range of matters from food supplies to business support; significant IT and HR activity to enable working from home where possible; all alongside other activities within different departments as they adapted to a new environment and sought ways to deliver their services in the context of the pandemic and associated restrictions. Updates on activities since the last report are outlined below.

3.4 Caring for People

Caring for People is a partnership approach bringing together the Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP), Third Sector Interface (TSI) and the Council. Working together, the focus is to help people affected by coronavirus, Covid-19, to receive essential support where no other support exists.

- 3.4.1 Guidance on social isolation and protection of people most vulnerable to the virus, has created a significant responsibility for the council to work in partnership and ensure those asked to remain in their homes for at least 12 weeks “shielding” are receiving essential supplies and services. This is being implemented by a ‘shielding’ work stream within Caring for People with almost 2,900 people identified as in need of ‘shielding’ in Argyll and Bute.

Key responses to date include:

- Creation and ongoing development of a Community Support webpage: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/coronavirus/help-for-communities> - this is regularly updated to reflect changing national guidance and to provide the latest information about financial and other support available. At 10th May the coronavirus specific web pages had received nearly 198,000 views and the Caring for People Community pages had received over 23,000 views.
- Launch of Volunteer Portal, volunteerargyllandbute.org, managed by TSI and supporting sign up of volunteers to categories of volunteering relevant to the crisis.
- Launch of Coronavirus Caring for People Helpline – 01546 605524 – and joint HSCP/ Council team managing the community response to ‘domestic help’ requests.
- Free School Meals programme – since first implemented, as detailed in the April report, this has been developed and augmented to ensure that those most in need are able to access food or meals in ways that work for them.
- Communication is also key – as well as the dedicated web page noted above, the council’s Corporate Communications channels have been used to provide and share information for people about all aspects of the pandemic including education arrangements, local and national support, staying safe and well and updates to council services, balanced with ‘business as usual’ communications activity.

- 3.4.2 The community helpline provides a single point of contact for concerns about financial, business, education, registration and social and homecare needs. Individuals can also use the helpline to volunteer. The Customer Service Centre Team deals with calls to the new helpline, in addition to calls coming in on

existing contact centre numbers, and has redeployed staff from the closed Service Points to deal with the demand. By 10th May, the Council's Coronavirus Helpline has taken 4,864 calls across all call types. This includes, for example, 575 calls about business support and 280 about benefits, alongside the very significant volume of calls relating to care and support. As support measures bed in, though, call volumes to the Helpline have declined, in line with the level of calls made to the national helpline from people in Argyll and Bute (currently around 25 per day). Issues relating to caring for people still account for nearly 50% of calls.

- 3.4.3 Almost 1,900 people have logged Caring for People requests via the Helpline and online request forms since they opened on 27th March and of these, at time of writing, 1,717 have had their needs fulfilled and 153 are in progress. Some customers have made multiple requests with 2,375 requests in total. The Community Development and Community Planning team manages the workload coming through the helpline in partnership with HSCP and co-ordinates responses to requests for help through a network of contacts based in eight locality areas across Argyll and Bute. In addition there are 30 volunteer co-ordinators in place to help mobilise local volunteering support alongside 37 community organisations and also partners who are available to help with requests.
- 3.4.4 People are referred to local support schemes where they exist. Community resilience/volunteer groups all over Argyll and Bute are developing solutions based on their local knowledge and to meet local needs. This includes shopping for those unable to get out themselves, collection and delivery of prescriptions and vital medication, delivery of food parcels and meals, and telephone befriending services.
- 3.4.5 The Shielding Team is proactively contacting local residents they know have received a shielding letter to ensure that the relevant support is in place. A second group of people are in the process of receiving shielding letters sent from a national level, beyond those prioritised on the initial high risk list. The Scottish Government will then refer individuals within Group 2 to the council's Caring for People Helpline. After an initially high burst of calls on launch, there are now an average of 15 calls per day via this route. At the time of writing there were 2882 shielded customers on the Council's Customer Services records management system, with contact made with almost 2,564. 486 have been enrolled for the national food parcel service, and 666 for the local food parcel service and 213 assisted with pharmacy requests. Those who wish it are now being contacted with follow up calls focusing on emotional support and digital inclusion. 1,707 have said they require no services.
- 3.4.6 Significant work is being undertaken in relation to data records and cross matching to ensure accurate and full records are maintained in relation to support for those 'shielding'. Shielding data is also being mapped to identify isolation spots across Argyll and Bute, to inform food and medication delivery systems.

Food

- 3.4.7 A Community Food Programme team is fulfilling requests for food received through the helpline and food coordinators are working closely with the Helpline

team, Welfare Team Community Development and Care for People Partnership to consider solutions to people in need accessing food. This is complex and can range from solutions to accessing money to pay for food, to questions over ID badges for volunteers shopping on behalf of others. Work is also taking place to support local food banks including sourcing food, recruiting volunteers and access funding.

- 3.4.8 The team is also working with local and national suppliers as well as local independent food retailers to meet the food needs of our communities and in conjunction with the Catering Service the distribution team is also looking at options for expanding the food provision available from the Hub schools. In the initial stages of the project several hundred food parcels of fresh and ambient (tinned or dried) produce have been delivered to homes and families across Argyll and Bute.
- 3.4.9 Staff from other council services and agencies, including Live Argyll, whose normal roles have been affected by the pandemic, are, with the support of HR, volunteering to support critical activity areas such as the Community Food Project. By the end of April the project had delivered 1,904 fresh food and 690 ambient food parcels to people in need across Argyll and Bute. Co-ordination and delivery has also required the support of a number of council teams including Marine Services, School Transport, Roads and Amenity Services and Education staff. Their efforts have been augmented by assistance from a number of local companies and volunteer groups which have helped significantly with the considerable logistics required.

Medication

- 3.4.10 A working group of Community Pharmacy Team, Community Development and Health Improvement is looking at a streamlined approach to delivery of medication with clear guidance to volunteers including safety and confidentiality when handling medication deliveries.

The council-operated Oban Airport is providing safety support to a trial delivering vital medical supplies between Oban and Mull hospitals. The project sees medical supplies being delivered by drones and is designed to support NHS logistics providing frontline staff in hard-to-reach communities with much-needed equipment. The drone company, Skyports, will fly its delivery drones beyond visual line of sight along a 17km route south from Oban then north west to the north coast of the isle of Mull. They will be supported by the team at the airport who will also be relaying safety messages to any other aircraft in the vicinity to safeguard the delivery.

3.5 Businesses

- 3.5.1 The Council has created a dedicated section on the website for information about COVID-19 and this includes a section on help for businesses: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/coronavirus-information-businesses>. Since the last report this has been updated to include information on:

- Extension to the small business grant scheme - in addition to a 100% grant on the first property, small business rate payers will be eligible to a 75% grant on all subsequent properties. New online application forms

have been implemented for this service. Charitable relief has been added to the list of conferring reliefs for the small business grant. The result is that organisations in receipt of charitable reliefs including community amateur sports clubs or community based social enterprises will now be eligible for the grant.

- Extension to the retail, hospitality and leisure grant fund – in addition to a 100% grant on the first property, business rate payers will be eligible for a 75% grant on all subsequent properties. Applications for this opened on 5 May.
- Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme – guidance and how to claim
- Self-employment Income Support Scheme
- Newly Self-Employed Hardship Fund – being managed by Local Authorities and allocated to the newly self-employed facing hardship through £2,000 grants. A new helpline option and online web application form have been implemented for this fund.
- Creative, Tourism & Hospitality Enterprises Hardship Fund – to be managed by the Enterprise Agencies in partnership with Creative Scotland and VisitScotland for creative, tourism and hospitality companies not in receipt of business rates relief
- Pivotal Enterprise Resilience Fund, managed by the Enterprise Agencies for vulnerable SME firms who are vital to the local or national economic foundations of Scotland
- Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme - a new temporary loan scheme delivered by the British Business Bank which is available to support SME and those in self-employment to access bank lending and overdrafts. The Scheme can support loans of up to £5 million in value and is interest free for 12 months.
- Non domestic Rates relief - all non-domestic properties in Scotland will get a 1.6% rates relief. Retail, hospitality and leisure businesses will get 100% rates relief. To be eligible, a property has to be occupied and the reliefs will be available from 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. These reliefs will be applied directly to rates bills by the Council.
- The business options on the council Helpline have been called 584 times since it went live and there have been 26,485 unique page views of the corona specific business pages on the council website.

3.5.2 Our Revenues and Benefits Team is administering the Scottish Government grant funding for individual businesses and are making good progress with 90% of applications being decided in an average turnaround time of 6.3 working days. They have provided £23.5million in grant support to small and medium-sized enterprises across Argyll and Bute. At 11th May this included 1,966 businesses awarded grants of £10,000 each, and 153 receiving £25,000 awards. 300 have been rejected and 50 grants are still in process. An additional 15 phase 2 small business grants of £7,500 have been awarded and 4 phase 2 retail hospitality and leisure grants of £18,750. 4 phase 2 grants applications have been rejected and 192 applications are still in process.

3.5.3 The team is also responsible for the application of rates relief and Northgate, the NDR system supplier has advised that the software to allow the Council to carry out annual billing is now available and work is now ongoing to test the software to allow annual billing to take place during the month of May with payments

being scheduled from June to March. Businesses eligible for rates relief will still receive a bill, however this will show the relief that has been applied.

- 3.5.4 Over 200 Covid-19 related business enquiries have been handed by Business Gateway and Economic Growth staff. They have supported businesses with advice about managing cashflow, accessing support, new ways of marketing and selling their products, and adapting and diversifying in response to Covid-19. They have also put in place a series of webinars running each week and covering a range of topics designed to support businesses to remain in operation, to diversify and to look beyond the pandemic to recovery.
- 3.5.5 It is recognised that there are situations where businesses will be unable to access grant funding due to eligibility criteria and officers from the Economic Growth Team will work closely with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to identify such gaps in funding support and will keep under review national guidance in this regard and incorporate new funding streams as appropriate.
- 3.5.5 The council's Planning and Development Management Service has augmented its home working operation and is fully open for approving business planning applications in the new context. Since restriction measures were put in place on 23rd March, the service has received and logged 165 new applications. Staff have validated 111 applications, determined 151 and advised customers accordingly. The team continue to meet all deadlines for external statistical performance reporting.

3.6 Education

- 3.6.1 A separate report has been prepared for the BCC on the innovative and wide ranging approaches being taken by the Education Service to continue to deliver learning and support staff using digital resources whilst following General Teaching Council Scotland advice and guidelines.
- 3.6.2 The Education Service has augmented and reshaped its approach to free school meal provision to ensure that those young people and families most in need are able to access healthy food in ways that work for them. This builds upon the actions reported on previously where ten hubs were established across the area and from where the free school meals and food provision operations could be implemented to support the whole of Argyll and Bute. The Education service is working in partnership with the Community Food Project teams and officers are proactively contacting families entitled to receive free school meals to offer support. They also continue to liaise with colleagues in Social Work to ensure that steps are taken to support those young people and families who are most vulnerable.
- 3.6.3 To further support young people at this time, and continuing to fulfil the Council's commitment to address period poverty the education service has put arrangements in place to ensure that no young people in the area have to go without access to free period products during the Covid-19 crisis, when the usual availability in schools is restricted and when it is more difficult to get products from shops. Many schools distributed period products to pupils before they closed, however, as the current Covid-19 Government restrictions continue, it is important to ensure that pupils' wellbeing needs continue to be met. An arrangement has been made with Hey Girls, one of Scotland's main providers of period products, which enables pupils to order from a range of products using a

survey monkey link. These products are free and are available to all children and young people in Argyll and Bute schools from P6 to S6 while the closure of schools continues.

3.7 Council Services Decisions and Actions

The following summary outlines a broad range of key decisions and actions that have been taken across Council services in response to the pandemic; incorporating emergency legislation, government guidance and working in partnership with other responding agencies. This is a rapidly evolving situation and this position will be subject to ongoing change as we mobilise our response to best protect our employees and communities and provide essential services. Information on all services is hosted on the Council's website at the following link: <https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/coronavirus-help-and-advice>

- The Council is currently providing an increased general waste collection frequency in response to COVID with 2x240litre bins collected fortnightly. As well as kerbside collections, bring sites continue to be open and available for responsible public use. These sites continue to be steadily serviced and large amounts of glass are removed e.g. eight tonnes collected from Tesco bring site in Oban over the weekend, and similar collections continue to take place over the council area. Public litter bins/dog waste bins are also being regularly serviced.
- At present household waste recycling centres remain closed across Scotland and the kerbside bulky uplift service is suspended (as it is in 29 of 32 Local Authorities) – the increased capacity of the current kerbside collection arrangements go some way to mitigating against this and provides a good level of service to residents. The waste collection service is being delivered in a safe and sustainable way, particularly in the context of staff absence, and is supported by staff across the entire Roads and Infrastructure service as required.
- Working with Registered Social Landlords and the Health and Social Care Partnership in relation to homelessness provision for people being discharged from hospital after being treated for Covid-19 and also in relation to the availability of homeless accommodation in all areas of Argyll and Bute. The council took steps to procure additional accommodation through hotels across Argyll just before the lockdown measures were put in place; this action was taken in anticipation of increased demand and pressure on the homelessness service.
- Supporting local voluntary and community groups to obtain the insurance cover they need in order to continue their work with local people. This includes sourcing appropriate cover and assisting groups with the costs of purchasing insurance. A suite of information briefings has been created for volunteers (groups and individuals) to use as they work in communities.
- Working closely with Police Scotland the Environmental Health Service is taking the lead on enquiries relating to business compliance with the Health Protection (Coronavirus)(Restrictions)(Scotland) Regulations 2020 as amended (requirement for certain premises to close / social distancing within premises); and Police Scotland being responsible for the wider social distancing and movement of people requirements.

- The Council has responded to concerns raised by Police Scotland in relation to the use of Council carparks at scenic locations in contravention of guidance in relation to non-essential travel and has consequently closed council car parks at Arrochar, Duck Bay, Luss and Helensburgh.
- Provision of revised seven-day death registration service to fulfil request from Scottish for daily data.

A report setting out all decisions taken under emergency powers will be reported to a meeting of the full Council.

3.8 Council Staff

The health and wellbeing of Council staff is also vital in our response to the pandemic and a wide range of decisions have been taken to facilitate safe working arrangements, working from home, redeployment and enhanced health and wellbeing supports.

The Council intranet and staff bulletins continue to be issued with advice and wellbeing support for staff and the Chief Executive's weekly emails include feedback from the general public in recognition and appreciation of the support and services being provided by Council staff in response to the pandemic.

As highlighted above, council staff whose roles have changed as a result of the pandemic are contributing in other areas of activity including handling helpline calls and assisting with the Community Food Project.

3.9 Recovery

The Council is also considering future arrangements to support recovery from the impact of the public health measures which have been implemented to control the global outbreak of Covid-19, and in particular, the recovery phase as it affects Argyll and Bute. A tactical group has been established which will take forward this process working with partners and communities, to facilitate a planned transition to the "new normal" and in time business as usual. Services continue to monitor resources in line with national guidance to identify any opportunities to change or restore services affected by the pandemic.

The impact of the controls which have been implemented nationally are still emerging and changing, and it will be important that the recovery strategy adapts and changes to reflect these.

4.0 CONCLUSION

This report seeks to provide a high level overview of some of the key decisions and actions that have been taken across council services in response to the pandemic; incorporating emergency legislation, government guidance and working in partnership with other responding agencies. On a daily basis there is very significant activity taking place right across the whole spectrum of council services as staff adapt to a challenging and often swiftly changing situation. All of this activity is being captured and logged for future reporting and to inform forward planning and the transition to recovery; this report provides just some examples of the very considerable volume of response work that is being delivered. This is

a rapidly evolving situation and this position is subject to ongoing change and review

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Policy - This is in keeping with the Council's commitment to manage its response to the Covid-19 pandemic in supporting the people and communities of Argyll and Bute and in adhering to national guidance.
- 5.2 Financial – none arising from this report.
- 5.3 Legal -. Amendment of the Powers Delegated to Officers and Standing Orders was agreed at the Council meeting of 30th March 2020 in accordance with Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.
- 5.4 HR – impacts on staff at all levels.
- 5.5 Fairer Scotland Duty:
 - 5.5.1 Equalities - protected characteristics – None
 - 5.5.2 Socio-economic Duty - none
 - 5.5.3 Islands - none
- 5.6. Risk – addresses risk associated with ensuring business continuity and resilience.
- 5.7 Customer Service – supports arrangements for amending decision making framework to support critical customer services.

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